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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes the history of public libraries and library literacy programs; describes current delivery models; and discusses initiatives in library literacy, profiling one successful public library program that serves adult English language learners and their families. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (Author/VWL)

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Library Literacy Programs for English Language Learners

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In 2000, 38% of the participants in federally funded adult programs were English language learners (U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2001). Many such programs have waiting lists, and programs of all kinds are expanding to serve the needs of adult English language learners. Public libraries, historically active in their support for literacy, have been increasing resources and programs to meet the literacy needs of immigrant adults and their families (American Library Association Office for Literacy and Outreach Services [ALA/OLOS], 2001; Constantino, 1998).

This digest summarizes the history of public libraries and library literacy programs; describes current delivery models; and discusses initiatives in library literacy, profiling one successful public library program that serves adult English language learners and their families.

History Of Library Literacy Programs

As early as 1629, Puritans bound for Salem, Massachusetts, included a collection of books in their cargo; in 1655, colonist Robert Keayne willed money for the founding of a public library in Boston (Shera, 1965). While many early libraries resided in universities, later industrialist philanthropists, such as Enoch Pratt and Andrew Carnegie, endowed public libraries and stipulated that local governments also provide financial support for local community libraries. Pratt's credo, "My library shall be for all, rich and poor without distinction of race or color," resonates among libraries today (Schuchat, 1985, p. 7).

In the 1960s, the federal War on Poverty Program increased funding to help support literacy programs (Comings & Cuban, 2000). Individual states and communities have continued to fund projects to reach increasingly diverse local populations. From 1988 to 1995, for example, the California State Library funded the Partnerships for Change Program, which involved 26 community libraries that analyzed and restructured programs and policies to better serve their culturally diverse communities (California State Library & Library of California, 2001).

Delivery Models

In 1999, the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana conducted a survey that found that 90% of the 1,067 libraries surveyed provide literacy services in one or more of three forms (Comings & Cuban, 2000):

1. developing collections that support existing literacy programs and actively promoting the services of those programs;
2. partnering with existing literacy programs by providing space and referring patrons to program services; and
3. providing literacy programs either in their own buildings or nearby.

Current Initiatives

The American Library Association (ALA) Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) supports a nationwide effort to enhance the literacy services of local libraries to "encourage opportunities for maximum intellectual participation for underserved populations" (ALA/OLOS, 1998). Since 1999, OLOS has sponsored a Diversity Fair at the annual ALA conference. Broward County, Florida, publishes a quarterly *Welcome Home Newsletter* in six languages that covers topics of interest to new immigrants. Broward and Miami-Dade counties collaborate on the Pan African Bookfest and Cultural Conference, which focuses on topics of concern to people of African descent. The Storm Lake (Iowa) Public Library's Book Bridges Program includes local Hispanic and Asian leaders and organizations as partners in this town of 9,000. (ALA/OLOS, 2000)

Since 1996, the Library Literacy Initiative funded by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund (2001) has provided support for public libraries to improve literacy services for adults, including those learning English. For example, the Queens Borough Public Library has served thousands of adults in its literacy programs. In one program at the Steinway Adult Learning Center, immigrants from more than 60 countries meet at the center to converse or to use computers.

Profile of a Public Library Program: Arlington County, Virginia

Arlington County, Virginia, is an ethnically diverse community of 189,453 whose residents speak over 60 languages (Arlington Public Schools, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In 20 years, Arlington County Public Library's (ACPL) services to new immigrants have grown from a small collection of materials to an integrated county-wide system. Following is a chronology of how, through the development of programs, one community has been able to meet the needs of its immigrant residents.

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- In the 1980s, with the arrival of Vietnamese and Cuban refugees in Arlington County, ACPL added small collections of materials in Vietnamese, Spanish, and English for nonnative speakers. Today these collections have expanded to reflect the languages and cultures of all of Arlington's diverse neighborhoods.
- In the early 1990s, ACPL established connections with local agencies working with immigrants. The library launched an adult new readers' book discussion program with help from teachers in Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP). The discussion groups continue to meet at two locations. Funding is provided by the Southland Corporation and the Friends of Arlington County Public Library, a nonprofit local group that raises funds for the library system.
- In the mid 1990s, ACPL launched satellite collections and weekly story times at four of the county's Bilingual Outreach Centers. The Centers, located in apartment complexes with large immigrant populations, were established by the county to assist with adjustment to life in a new culture. The programs, collections, and services at the Centers acquaint immigrants with the services available through the library system. Initially funded with grants from the Virginia State Library, the U.S. Department of Education, Community Development Block Grants and Friends of the Library, the Outreach Centers' libraries are now funded by ACPL's operating budget.
- In the late 1990s, the library director convened a summit to examine services to the rapidly increasing immigrant community. Advisors ranged from the coordinator of the Queens Public Library New Americans Program to local community leaders. A work group was charged with developing an organized program of services for the immigrant community. One of its outcomes was a welcome brochure that explains library terms in clear, everyday English.
- In 2000, a "CyberCenter" computer learning lab was instituted at a library branch in a neighborhood with a large immigrant population. Grant funding provided computer equipment for the lab, staffed primarily by a coordinator and volunteers. In its first year of operation, CyberCenter served over 12,000 users. With funding from the Gates Foundation, a CyberCenter at the Central Library opened in June 2001.
- Young Adult Services' library staff work with the county schools. Two middle schools host library-sponsored discussion groups for immigrant learners. Staff make presentations to parent groups at schools with diverse populations and have hosted "family evenings" at the library for Spanish-language parent groups, where stories in Spanish and potluck dinners provide a festive atmosphere.
- ACPL staff reflect the community they serve. The library recruits, hires, and promotes staff from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Bilingual staff members wear badges printed (in the specific language) with "I speak Spanish," "I speak Amharic," "I speak Vietnamese," and so forth.

Conclusion

Public libraries have changed throughout U.S. history to become increasingly inclusive of the communities they serve. The efforts of the American Library Association, granting institutions, and local libraries are helping to address the complex literacy needs of adult English language learners and their families. Arlington County Public Library's long-term plan of working with local partners and shifting available, stable resources to meet and sustain the needs of immigrant learners is a promising model for communities throughout the United States.

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